

## Taylorsville - Tree of the Month – April, 2008 - Chaste Tree - Latin: *Vitex agnus-castus*

Are you looking for a unique plant, something lovely with purplish flowers and loves the heat? You might want to consider *Vitex*, a great under-utilized shrub that is native to Europe, Asia and parts of Africa. The summertime scene is here in Utah dominated by green trees, with most flowering trees past their spring blooming season - other than a few cold hardy Crape Myrtles, the Rose of Sharon Trees, and the Pee-Gee Hydrangea Tree. The chaste tree takes on the heat and humidity of summer by providing a cooling splash of blue, white or pink to the midsummer scene. Though not common, chaste tree is a widely adapted small tree or large shrub. Sizes vary depending on the species and climate. In warmer areas where winter dieback is not an issue, they can reach a height of 10 to 20 feet. It grows as high as it does wide with spreading branches. It is one of the few winter-hardy woody members of the verbena family.

It is usually multi trunked tree with distinctive palmate compound leaves with five to seven leaflets. The leaves resemble those of marijuana; occasionally the plant is called hemp tree for that reason. When crushed, the leaves have a distinctive aroma. Blue to violet spikes of flowers are produced early- to mid-summer on the ends of new shoots being up to a foot long, and continue to flower on and off during the summer to the fall. White and pink flowered forms are available, but the darker colored selections stand out better in the summer landscape. After flowering, the bloom spikes are covered with peppercorn-sized rounded fruits that line the old bloom stock. Summer flowering trees such as this make good additions to the summer shrub border, for screening areas or as lawn specimens. Although the Chaste Tree has no fall color, the grayish-green foliage is attractive even when not in flower. The tree size can be controlled easily by late winter pruning to keep the plant to a more modest stature. Chaste trees flower on new growth so hard pruning does not disrupt flowering.

It is a favorite of bees, butterflies and hummingbirds, and very fragrant both the flowers and the leaves; so put it where it can be seen and enjoyed from patios and decks. Many beekeepers seek out chaste tree as a summertime nectar source. Chaste tree is a tough, drought-resistant plant hardy from zones 6 to 9. It needs full sun to flower but is not particular about soil type. Like most plants, it grows larger in better soils with some attention paid to watering and fertilization. Other than the possibility of root rot in heavy clay soils, chaste tree is not bothered by insects or disease. *Vitex* prefers full sun, well-drained soil (especially in the winter) and hot weather! It also has little problem with pests as the foliage has been shown to contain a natural insect repellent. Chaste Trees often die back to the ground during the winter in Utah so it is important to prune back in the spring to help new growth. It is somewhat late to emerge, so be patient. If you can't find it locally, Forest Farm in Oregon lists a few varieties on their web site at [WWW.FORESTFARM.COM](http://WWW.FORESTFARM.COM); Park Seed on their web site has a variety at [WWW.PARKSEED.COM](http://WWW.PARKSEED.COM); [AND RCW NURSERIES](http://WWW.RCSNURSERIES.COM) on their web site at [WWW.RCSNURSERIES.COM](http://WWW.RCSNURSERIES.COM)/ has several varieties.

